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ABSTRACT

A National Institute of Education-sponsoring project investigated how evaluations of nontraditional programs could be performed to maximize the utility of evaluation findings. This led to a conceptual model of the evaluation process which included the following elements: (1) identification of information needs; (2) design, collection, and analysis of information; and (3) dissemination of information. To determine the information needs for the study of nontraditional programs, 70 policymakers in postsecondary education were interviewed. The five major needs identified addressed two issues: (1) whether the needs of the learner were satisfied; and (2) whether resources were effectively used. (EMH)

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Assessing External Evaluative Information Needs

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We are concerned in this session with two broad concepts: nontraditional education and program evaluation. More specifically, we are concerned with trying to understand their overlap. I have been asked to approach external program evaluation by relating to you my experience with an NIE-sponsored study on external evaluation of nontraditional postsecondary education programs.

As you know, Congress gave the National Institute of Education (NIE) the mission to improve education through research and development. As part of this mission, NIE has been concerned with both the evaluation of innovations, and the study of open-learning programs. The former concern is manifested through their Assessment of Innovative Developments program, and the latter through their funding of the University of Mid-America.

For more than a year now, NIE has been developing a program which is the offspring of these two concerns. The focus of the program is the evaluation of open-learning and nontraditional programs. The effort is projected to consist of three parts: (1) pre-design activities; (2) design activities; and (3) the actual evaluation research.

NIE selected TEAM Associates, Inc., to perform the first part: the pre-design activities. The activities were based on NIE's view that nontraditional, innovative programs require nontraditional, innovative evaluations. Whether this is in fact true remains to be seen. Nevertheless, they felt that innovative education programs are often so different in operation and outcome from traditional programs, that evaluations performed along traditional lines are irrelevant to the needs and interests of either learners, decision-makers or policy makers. This perceived irrelevancy in the past has not, however, decreased the demand for evaluation of innovations. In fact, innovations are increasingly subject to questions founded on that Missourian attitude: "show me."

Our project was concerned, therefore, with how evaluations of nontraditional programs could be performed so as to maximize the utility of the evaluation findings to different

IR003802

audiences - audiences external to the program, audiences in a position to influence postsecondary education policy. The project consisted of two parts. In the first part, we reviewed and analyzed the evaluation literature and interviewed a series of administrators and evaluators. We found from this refiew that evaluative information was perceived to lack utility when one or more of the following was present:

1. The information was not presented to the audience, i.e., the decision-makers, in a manner to which they were responsive. As one evaluator put it: "The people we're interested in influencing, for the most part, don't know a chi square from a load of coal. If you give them a 400-page report, it is just not going to get read, and if they do try and read it, they're going to be turned off by the technical jargon."

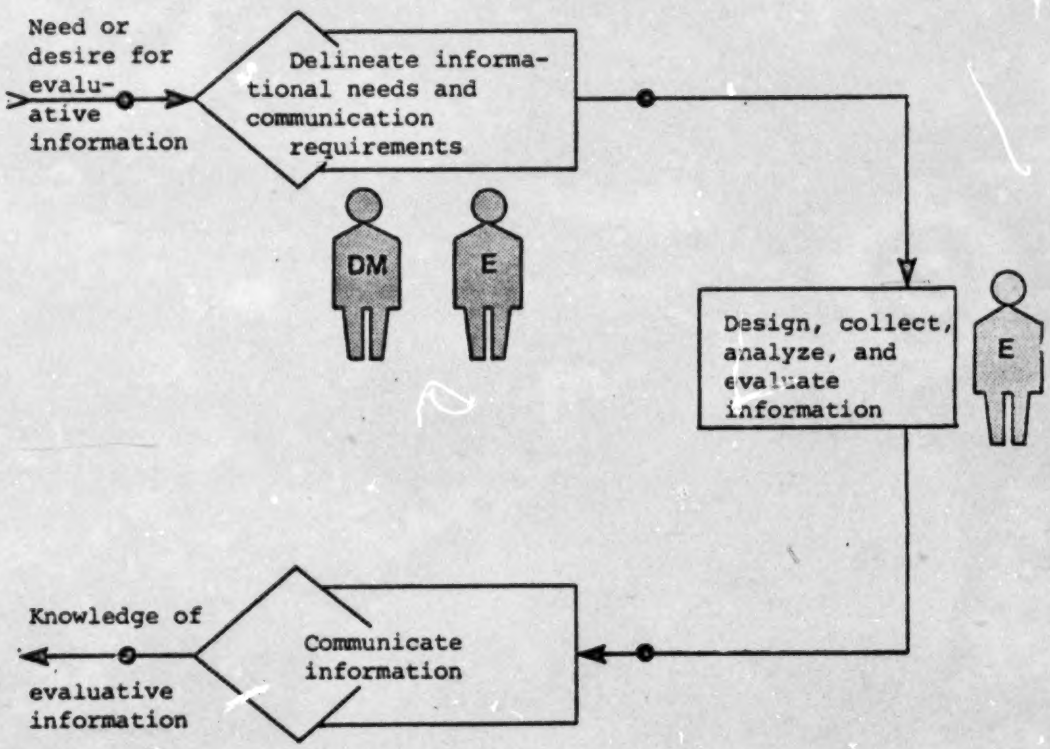
2. The information was perceived by the audience to lack relevance, timeliness, or credibility. In a review of Federal evaluations, Joseph Wholey and associates (1970) found that "too many studies bear little or no relationship to the critical program and policy issues." Commenting on timliness, Stufflebeam (1971) pointed out that for decision-making "the best information is useless if it comes too late." The dilemma that plagues evaluations is the competing requirements between timeliness and credibility. As John Mann (1969) pointed out: "The better the study, the longer it takes and consequently the less usefulness it may have. Conversely, the sloppier the procedure, the more likely it is to provide information on questions of interest, even though this data will be of doubtful validity."

3. There is a lack of an identifiable, interested audience. At times, policy issues and decision-makers change so frequently that there is often no interested audience around when a long term evaluation is completed. At other times, there was none to begin with.

In order to relate these features hindering utility to specific inadequacies in parts of the evaluation process, we developed a conceptual model of this process. This is shown in Figure 1 in a much simplified form.

In the first subprocess, as well as in the last subprocess,

Figure 1 - Evaluation Process



DM = Decision-maker

E = Evaluator

the evaluator acts more as an advisor or consultant rather than a researcher. The process was viewed as an initial series of more and more well defined needs for information and data, and a subsequent series of more and more analyzed results. If the initial need for evaluative information by the decision-maker is fulfilled by the communicated information at the end of the process, then the information is defined as having utility. That is, there is congruency between results and needs (Smith, 1975).

The subprocess which most leads to the features hindering utility, that is, lack of relevance, timeliness, etc., is the first one, the delineation of the information needs and the communication requirements of the decision-maker.

In this subprocess the evaluator is, in effect, performing a needs assessment. He is trying to determine the following:

- who are the individuals interested in the evaluation?
- what is the content of their evalutive information needs?
- for what type of decision is the information needed (what resource allocations will be affected?)
- when is the information needed?
- what level of reliability and validity are needed?
- what standards of comparison are required?
- what methods and format are preferred by the audience for presentation of the findings?

As you can see, if a set of evaluation requirements are developed by the decision-maker and the evaluator together on the basis of the answers to these questions, there is a high probability that the evaluative information will not lack relevance, not lack timeliness and not lack credibility, and it will be presented to an interested audience in a format that is preferred.

In the second part of our project, we, in fact, made a preliminary attempt at performing this needs assessment for the projected NIE evaluation of nontraditional programs. Interviews were conducted with approximately 70 policymakers, i.e., individuals who are, formally or informally, in a position to influence postsecondary education policy. The interviewees were affiliated with Federal agencies, Congress, State legislatures, open-learning institutions, private foundations, State postsecondary education systems, pro-

fessional organizations and research groups (Smith and Smith,1975a).

Through both an open- and closed-ended inquiry, the interviewees were asked to specify those questions that an evaluation should address in order to provide them with the most useful information in their administrative, legislative, and policymaking activities. We found that five questions stood out as leading to information having the highest levels of utility to the interviewees. These are shown in Figure 2.

The first three of these questions are focused on the learner, the latter two are focused on the program operation. Any evaluation which is to be performed will need to emphasize data collection in these areas if it is to be useful. We also posed several questions to interviewees concerning the impact of nontraditional programs on faculty, other institutions, and the broader community. These are shown in Figure 3. None of these, however, were rated consistently at the highest levels of utility by a majority of interviewees.

The interviewees' responses were also divided into several categories on the basis of their presumed policy role and decision responsibilities. We found only two correlations between that policy role and their information needs that could be considered at all conclusive, given the small sample in each category:

1. the evaluative information needs of administrators of open-learning programs appear to be concentrated on learner focused questions; and

2. interviewees affiliated with State government appear to rate evaluative information concerning program finances more consistently than information in other areas at the highest levels of utility.

With respect to the other needs assessment questions, we found the following:

- for the wide range of individuals interviewed the timing requirements varied from "as soon as possible" to "the time it takes to do a valid study.";

- the levels of validity and reliability varied from that associated with experimental and quasi-experimental research designs to that found in journalistic accounts; and

- preferences for standards of comparison spanned the range of possibilities: that is, other nontraditional programs, traditional programs, no outside comparisons.

Figure 2

QUESTIONS LEADING TO INFORMATION RATED AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF UTILITY MORE OFTEN THAN OTHERS

Learner Focused

- Does the content of the curriculum address the needs and wants of the learners?
- Does the program satisfy learner needs, or personal and professional interests?
- Are the procedures for assessment of learner competency and achievement valid and credible to other institutions or employers?

Program Focused

Program Finances

- How does the cost-effectiveness of the program compare with other programs?

Program Process

- Which program components, facilities, staff or finances are essential to achievement of the outcomes?

Figure 3

FURTHER IMPACT FOCUSED QUESTIONS

- To what extent can all or part of the program be adopted or adapted elsewhere? Are the circumstances or participants of the program unique?

- What is the impact of changing faculty roles?

- To what extent does the program impact on other postsecondary programs, either traditional or nontraditional?

One might conclude from these results that while there is some consensus on the focuses of evaluation, i.e., the five questions mentioned earlier, there is none unfortunately in the decision contexts. What we found, however, is that few interviewees were able to identify specific decisions for which they would use the information. It may be that many of the interviewees sought the evaluative information for reasons other than decisionmaking, perhaps, for example, for advocacy or for personal opinion formation without further action.

Whatever the reasons, this hinders the design of the NIE external evaluation because it cannot be determined which of the preliminary specifications are appropriate; the specifications for timing, standards of comparison, validity and reliability appear unrelated to decision contexts.

The design will also be hindered because well-defined evaluation criteria and indicators still need to be developed from the five broad evaluative questions identified. For example, in the question "does the program satisfy learner needs?", who defines "needs"? The teacher? The student? or others? Who are the "learners", are they individuals enrolled in the program or are they potential enrollees? What is meant by 'program?" - is it the instructional methods or the instructional content? These questions which affect an evaluation's relevancy, can only be answered by the decision maker.

Thus, we concluded that if NIE seeks to perform external evaluations, and not research studies of nontraditional programs, a specific audience with well-defined decision needs must be identified. Otherwise, the evaluation findings have a high probability of having little utility, not unlike the evaluations of many other innovative educational programs. (Smith and Smith, 1975b)

Let me close by suggesting that evaluation is like the science of navigation, it is but a means to an end. The question posed much earlier in history, therefore is even more pertinent today:

"What is the use of the science of navigation, if we don't know where to go?"

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